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ABSTRACT

The voice of wisdom, embodied in the character of an Old Man, presumably holding impeccable teaching credentials and wielding a sterling teaching record, advises a youthful, idealistic, and not-so-wise graduate student on the ways of the System. Subjects range far and wide, and include dialogues on: (1) teaching college English, freshman composition, and sophomore literature; (2) student grades and conferences; and (3) promotions. (RL)

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TEACHING COLLEGE ENGLISH: FIVE DIALOGUES

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UNIVERSITY OF IDAHO

Reprinted from COLLEGE ENGLISH

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

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KENNETH HOAG

I. TEACHING COLLEGE ENGLISH

Youth: I have just arrived on your campus, fresh from graduate school, for my first full-time teaching assignment. The department head suggested that I talk with you. *Old Man:* I think I understand. Our college shares the hazards confronting most other colleges and perhaps has a few of its own. You have your Ph.D.? *Youth:* Well, practically. I still have to complete my dissertation and take the finals. *Old Man:* In other words, you hold a master's degree and have fulfilled the residence requirement for the doctor's degree. *Youth:* Yes, sir. And the course requirements. *Old Man:* Wouldn't it have been better for you to stay on until you had been granted the doctor's degree? It has come to be considered a prerequisite for a successful career on a college faculty. *Youth:* Well, you see, I wasn't making much progress on my dissertation—somehow I just couldn't bring myself to work on it—and I was teaching half-time—and my major professor was on leave of absence—and I got married. *Old Man:* I see. You decided on a wife instead of a degree. *Youth:* I didn't really decide between them. I fully expect to get my degree sometime. I might even complete my dissertation this year in my spare time. *Old Man:* It has been done, I believe. *Youth:* But you see, I became acquainted with this girl in a graduate seminar. We had a lot in common. I was lonely. I was secretly in love with a girl in one of the freshman composition sections I was teaching, but I couldn't do anything about that because of the ethics of the profession. *Old Man:* Quite. *Youth:* So I got married. I suppose it was kind of calculated. *Old Man:* A wife can assist one in his career. *Youth:* Oh, yes. We read together and discuss our reactions. *Old Man:* If a wife is attractive, a good hostess, tactful, subtly aggressive for her husband, and has money in her own right, she may be very helpful—if the husband is not a clod. Sometimes even then. *Youth:* Oh, I wouldn't marry a girl for money. *Old Man:* I take it, then, that you have money from home? *Youth:* No, sir. It's the other way around. Since my father died, I have had to help out my mother. I think it's better that way than to have her live with us. She's one reason I decided to get a full-time job. *Old Man:* If money is a major consideration, shouldn't you have chosen a different occupation or career? *Youth:* I tried business—that is, selling in a department store; and manufacturing—I mean working in a factory. I didn't like them. *Old Man:* No, I suppose not. *Youth:* When I was a boy I liked to tinker with motors and light sockets, and I thought of becoming an electrical engineer, but I wasn't very good in mathematics or science courses. *Old Man:* In other words, you didn't fit the predominant social patterns. *Youth:* It was really a process of elimination. My grades in English were pretty good, so I went on with that. *Old Man:* And about the only way a person trained in English can make a living is to teach English—is that it? *Youth:* That's about right, I guess. *Old Man:* In other words, you don't have a burning zeal to help raise the level of literacy and literary taste of the nation? *Youth:* I'm afraid not, not when you put it that way. But I like to teach, all right. *Old Man:* And you prefer college teaching to high-school teaching. *Youth:* I feel quite sure. You see I have had a lot

of Education courses. I was afraid I might have to teach in high school if I couldn't get a college position. *Old Man:* You thought these courses a waste of time? *Youth:* I wouldn't go that far. They do tend to be repetitious, and some of them are rather thin, but I got something out of some of the courses. *Old Man:* As I recall, one of the chief values I derived from my Education courses was a point of view, the idea of meeting the student at his level of comprehension. Many teachers never acquire that point of view. *Youth:* It wasn't just the courses; it was a lot of other things—the rigid hours, the heavy teaching loads, the extracurricular activities, the disciplinary problems. *Old Man:* Whereas a college teacher is a person of prestige, independence, and leisure? The long-cherished conception that a college is a community of scholars, even including the lowly composition instructor. Would that it were true. *Youth:* Well, isn't it true—relatively, at least? *Old Man:* Perhaps, but the situation is not entirely idyllic: the rift between town and gown; the social game; the faculty debates; the gossip; the maneuvering for position; the struggle for preferment, popularity, and power. After all, a college is an organization. *Youth:* But I intend to do my work well and mind my own business. *Old Man:* Excellent. May you be spared for many years. *Youth:* It is true that I have more or less drifted into teaching college English, but my real interest is to have the opportunity to read and write. *Old Man:* Quite right. Let us get down to the real reasons. You feel that the subject-matter of literature will keep you in touch with some of the great creative minds of all time. *Youth:* That's right. *Old Man:* Of course you can continue reading in your spare time as you might in any other occupation, but it may be some years before you will have the opportunity to teach literature. *Youth:* Oh, no. I think you are mistaken. If I decide to stay on, I have been promised a section of literature next year. You see I inquired about that before I accepted this position. *Old Man:* I am surprised. The number of students enrolled in the required freshman composition course greatly exceeds the number of students enrolled in all literature courses. If it was not necessary to staff the freshman course, there would be many fewer openings in college English departments. *Youth:* I have the letter right here. It says: "The probable teaching assignment for beginning instructors is four sections of English composition. If your relationship with the department is mutually agreeable and you remain on the staff, you may be considered for a section of literature when one becomes available at some time after your first year." *Old Man:* The successful administrator soon masters the art of qualified commitments. *Youth:* But why should a prospective college teacher spend years of graduate study in literature if he must then teach only freshman composition? *Old Man:* That is a question the experts have long debated and have not yet successfully answered. You said you like to write. Have you done much writing? *Youth:* Themes, when I was a freshman, term reports, and part of my thesis. *Old Man:* Perhaps you hope to become a literary scholar—a critic or a biographer? Or perhaps an anthologist or a textbook writer? *Youth:* I admire people who can do those things, but that isn't what I meant. I meant creative writing—poetry, drama, short stories, novels. *Old Man:* You have done some creative writing, then? *Youth:* Not as much as I should like. A little in high school, and some in a creative writing course in college. I haven't had much time to devote to it. *Old Man:* What you would like, ideally, is an award or fellowship or a private income without any teaching duties, so that you could spend your time reading and writing as you saw fit. *Youth:* Well, perhaps, ideally—though I am not sure that I have the initiative, direction, or

self-confidence to achieve anything worthwhile on my own. In any case, as yet I haven't the qualifications for an award, and I don't have a private income. *Old Man:* The next best thing, I take it, is to have a position that may stimulate you to read and write. You are not particularly interested in becoming an administrator, an educator, or a scholar. We might say, then, that you have the soul of an artist; you are an appreciator —and hope to become a creator—of the arts. *Youth:* I hadn't thought of it that way, but you may be right. *Old Man:* And to the average man in the workaday world, a person with such a temperament is an introvert or a misfit, but to the person himself and others like him he is the artist in conflict with society. *Youth:* Aren't we taught that for many people the life of the artist, as you put it, is the good life? *Old Man:* Yes, if one is content with the esthetic or spiritual rewards. The other pressures, however, are very great. *Youth:* I am sure of that. *Old Man:* You seem to be an unusually perceptive young man—perceptive enough, I think, to realize that it is seldom possible for one to take over completely the role of the artist and still hold his job as a teacher. *Youth:* I see. It is a compromise. *Old Man:* Yes, or an adjustment. And speaking of adjustment, I suppose I should be negligent as your faculty advisor if I failed to give you some advice, though advice is no proper substitution for experience. *Youth:* Please do. *Old Man:* Well, then, first of all, start out by being an observer rather than a critic. Every college has its own traditional way of doing things that is not quite like the way of any other college. Don't try to reform or improve our college practices in the light of your own college experiences right away—say at least for a year or two. You may discover that there are good reasons for our practices. *Youth:* You don't need to worry about that. I am not that kind of person. *Old Man:* No, I don't believe you are. But it is possible to be taken in by others of that inclination. *Youth:* Thank you, I'll look out for it. *Old Man:* Second, learn to keep the right distance between yourself and your students. There are no exact rules. It is a matter of touch or feeling, if you know what I mean. One has to judge the person, the class, or the situation. Beware of both undue familiarity and seeming indifference. *Youth:* I think I know what you mean. *Old Man:* Third, administrators judge subordinates in their own image. They appreciate promptness in routine matters, conventional attire, and absence of irregularities. If you have a spirit of revolt, it is better to express it in your writing than in your appearance or conduct. *Youth:* We have covered a lot of ground in this conversation. *Old Man:* So we have. Perhaps we should call a halt. Good-by for now, and good luck.

II. Teaching Freshman Composition

Youth: You may recall that I came in to see you several days ago. I am one of the new composition instructors. *Old Man:* Yes. I remember. Come in and sit down, please. *Youth:* We had quite a long talk about my reasons for teaching college English, but we mentioned teaching freshman composition only in passing. I thought you might have some suggestions. *Old Man:* It is a reasonable assumption. I have been teaching freshman composition off and on—mostly on—since I was your age, and I have written some things for and about the course. *Youth:* Yes, I know. *Old Man:* It is slippery footing, however. What works for me may not work for you. Furthermore, if you are like most of the other young men who come to us with a year or two of part-time teaching experience, you will try to use here the practices of the school where you taught last, even

though you found some of them irksome at the time and even though they are contrary to our local experience. *Youth:* I may be an exception. *Old Man:* You may be. We sometimes get a bright young man with a learner's attitude. By suggestions, do you mean such things as whether to stand up and lecture or sit down and discuss? *Youth:* I didn't have that in mind, but I should like to hear your comment. *Old Man:* Generally speaking, I should say sit down and discuss. On the other hand, with a large class or with inattentive students it may be more effective to stand. I haven't much use for the lecture method myself, though it is one way for an instructor to assert his ego, impress his students, avoid embarrassing questions, and fill up a class period. It seems to me that it is usually out of place in a composition class. *Youth:* How can one use the class period, then? *Old Man:* Give detailed and explicit assignments. Discuss with students, individually, suitable subjects for their home themes or reference papers. Have students write outlines, paragraphs, and sentences on the blackboard for correction. Use an opaque projector for student themes. Hand out mimeographed copies of student themes for analysis. Have the best student themes read aloud before the class. Have students give short talks on the subjects of their themes or reference papers. Have students write short impromptu themes. Return instructor-marked themes and have them corrected in class by the students. Provide training in oral and silent reading. Discuss the handbook exercises and the selections in the reader. Always provide a favorable atmosphere for student questions. *Youth:* Isn't such use of class time more appropriate to high school or the grades than to college? *Old Man:* It is appropriate wherever the job has to be done. *Youth:* By "job to be done" I gather that you mean teaching students to write, read, and speak English accurately, clearly, and effectively. *Old Man:* If you use the word "accurately," there may be lifted eyebrows in the "usage" camp. "Ah-ha," they will say, "the old prescriptive grammar again." And if you use the word "effectively," others will misunderstand you and say, "Why try to teach a beautiful prose style to virtual illiterates?" But in attempting to put the problem concisely, you have, I think, stated it very well. At the college level I might even agree with the order of importance in which you have arranged the words: "write, read, and speak" and "accurately, clearly, and effectively." *Youth:* Thank you. Even though I put it well, as you say, I am not sure that sort of thing should be taught in college. *Old Man:* Neither am I. But if the colleges are going to admit large numbers of students who have serious native language deficiencies—and most colleges do—the colleges should probably help to remedy the situation. I doubt that English composition is any less academic than some other subjects granted college credit. *Youth:* I take it, then, that although English composition is taught in the English department, you don't think it can be considered a course in the humanities. *Old Man:* I shouldn't think so. Many departments and instructors try to make it such a course by including a considerable amount of literature. Others emphasize logic or semantics or the history of the language. *Youth:* That is a good thing, isn't it? Those are important subjects, and many students, especially in the technical fields, would learn nothing about them if they weren't brought into the required composition course. *Old Man:* They are, indeed, important subjects—so important that we teach them in separate courses. There are also other important subjects or fields that many college students will never come in contact with. There is always the danger that because the English com-

position course is required of all students it will become a catchall and divert attention from the main business for which the course is planned—teaching the basic English skills. *Youth:* Who is to say what should be included in this course? *Old Man:* Not primarily the young English instructors themselves, strange as it may seem. Rather, the entire college or university faculty, the deans and department heads—perhaps even the president; the employers, the alumni, the parents of students. They leave the details to us, but they know in general what they want. *Youth:* If they leave the details to us, we should be able to include literature. Surely it can be argued that reading the English and American masterpieces will not only improve reading skill but also have a favorable effect on the student's speech and writing. *Old Man:* Some very slight effect, perhaps. Both use words, after all. But at best it is a devious approach. I doubt that reading Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* will be of much help in writing a clearly worded telegram or office directive or a term paper in sociology; nor will they help a student to read his geology textbook intelligently. *Youth:* Perhaps all students should be required to take a course in literature, then. *Old Man:* A few departments other then English do require a literature course. We can't dictate that point. *Youth:* But one can't teach composition in a vacuum. Students have to read something and talk and write about something. *Old Man:* True. They have had various experiences in the eighteen years of their lives. They can write and speak about those. In fact they can read and write and speak about anything, including literature. I am only saying that, granted our course objectives, the subject matter should not be entirely or mainly literature simply because the young men or women who teach the course have a special liking for it or training in it. I might add a footnote. If literature is considered an indispensable part of the course, let the student read one or more full-length books that are reasonably close to his level of experience or comprehension. He may remember books like *Arrowsmith* or *The Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens* and use them as a point of reference for the rest of his life; whereas he may soon and gladly forget an anthology of one hundred or more separate pieces. *Youth:* You are in sympathy, then, with the story attributed to Sinclair Lewis when he was invited to speak to a gathering of women writers. He got up before this large audience of well-dressed club women and said, "I understand you are interested in writing." He paused before going on. "Then," he said, "why don't you stay home and write?" And he walked off the platform. You remember the story? *Old Man:* Yes. You are suggesting that it illustrates the point that people learn to write by writing—not by means of some other activity, such as reading literature or listening to lectures about writing. *Youth:* If that is true, what is the place of the instructor? *Old Man:* The place of the instructor is to provide the problem and correct or criticize the result. He may also provide guides, that is, models or examples; rules or principles or warnings, within the range of the student to comprehend or use them. He should be able to set a suitable example, himself, particularly in his speech. *Youth:* I suppose so, if he is going to teach speech, but why teach it in this course? *Old Man:* The least important reason is that it is traditional; it was taught in this course at the time the college was founded. More important, not only is it our primary method of communication—far more common in daily life than writing—but certain elements of it have a direct influence on writing. Many students who grow up in

select homes or communities have no difficulty with agreement of subject and verb or reference of pronouns. They have heard and imitated these language conventions from earliest childhood, and some of them speak and write beautifully complex and lucid sentences and have extensive vocabularies without any help from English teachers. *Youth:* On that basis the bad students should be born again and grow up in the right families instead of taking a course in English composition. *Old Man:* Yes. But in a democracy we challenge that point of view. We claim that, whatever the status at birth or the family background, every child should have an equal opportunity. The local, state, and federal governments spend enormous amounts of money in order that circumstances may not be a barrier. *Youth:* Is this money spent in vain? *Old Man:* I don't think so. Of course the influence of the home or casual environment is strong. But most students make progress; some students make a great deal of progress. *Youth:* Is that just your opinion? *Old Man:* Oh, no. There is plenty of statistical evidence. *Youth:* A few minutes ago you spoke of providing "models or examples; rules or principles or warnings, within the range of the student to comprehend or use them." Will you please elaborate this statement? *Old Man:* Gladly. These are points about which I hold strong convictions; consequently there are those who hold equally strong opposing convictions. Take the question of models. Students may be taught to read more complex and subtle material than we can expect them to write. We can teach freshmen to read novels or plays or poetry, just as we can teach them to read textbooks in the social sciences or reference books or magazine articles by authorities or professional writers, but we can hardly expect them to write materials of this kind. My point is that the widely used book of essays may be suitable for teaching reading or for class discussion, but it is too difficult to serve as a group of models for student writing. *Youth:* But you said that part of the instructor's function was to provide models or examples. I can see that if the problem is to teach students to write themes of—say—narrative-exposition, some literary forms would hardly serve as the best models, but what would serve better than published articles or essays? *Old Man:* For what I have in mind, the word "example" is more exact than "model." I should think that the best examples are the outstanding themes or reference papers of the students themselves, perhaps accumulated over a period of years. The five-hundred word, three-paragraph home theme or the one-page, one-paragraph class theme is really an artificial form, not very closely related to any of our accepted literary or scholarly forms of writing. It is contrived or dictated by practical considerations to provide the elementary training in writing that the student needs. *Youth:* I can't think of any argument against that point. *Old Man:* There are some, but let us go on. Take "warnings." I warn students not to ramble or get lost while uncovering printed sources for a reference paper. A student may get so interested in his subject that he can't stop reading around it in all directions. I admit I don't always follow my own advice. When I look up a word in a dictionary I sometimes read about several other words my eye happens to fall on. But my students have a job to do within a space and time limit, and I warn them. *Youth:* I understand what you mean about warnings. Now for rules and principles. *Old Man:* To go on for a moment with the reference paper, I insist that a student choose as a subject for such a paper one that he has first-hand knowledge of. Standard subjects like "The Egyptian Pyramids"

or "The Great Wall of China" are forbidden unless the student has visited these places. That is one of my rules. *Youth:* I should think it is both an unconventional and an arbitrary rule. *Old Man:* It is, but it helps the student to distinguish his own material from that obtained from printed sources; consequently it helps to solve the problem of plagiarism. I use another device—call it a rule if you like—for the same reasons: "Every passage restated or quoted from a borrowed source must begin with an introductory phrase, such as 'According to so-and-so,' and end with a footnote symbol." *Youth:* I think I'll try those rules. I have had the kind of trouble with the reference paper that you speak of. By rules, though, I usually think of the rules of grammar. *Old Man:* Most English teachers and students do. You realize, of course, that this is a much debated area. The attack on Latinized grammar as an unrealistic description of contemporary usage, the recognition of levels of usage, the multiplication of terms referring to the same grammatical concept—these have resulted in confusion about a subject that at best is fairly complex. The college textbook writers and publishers have done little to help the situation. In order to appeal to instructors who hold a variety of points of view, they have retained the old and added the new. Some rules contain so many terms, are accompanied by so many qualifications, and require such experienced judgment that they are virtually meaningless or useless even for the instructor. *Youth:* You would throw out grammar, then? *Old Man:* I didn't say that. First, I am trying to present the problem. Add to the point I have just made the fact that most students have been taught to memorize rules and to diagram or analyze sentences throughout eight or more years of school before arriving at college. Many of them have never understood what they were doing or why. Some of them have learned to detest the subject and the people who teach it. Finally, they have had little or no supervised practice in writing—and, in high school, not much more in speaking or reading, except for some study of literature. *Youth:* All right. I see the problem. Do you teach grammar or not? *Old Man:* As little as possible. But I am prepared to teach it if it serves a purpose. Teaching the subject-verb-complement order may help a student to overcome his sentence-fragment and run-on sentence difficulties, but I try first the method of having him say his sentence aloud and listen to the pause and drop of his voice at the end of the sentence. Punctuation rules contain grammatical terms, but punctuation may also be taught by examples and with emphasis on meaning. If I can command the respect of the student, I use the "we say" or "we do" method instead of resorting to rule. But when he feels more secure with a "reason," as he calls it, I give him a rule, even though he doesn't understand it. If people were to make the fullest use of their dictionaries, they would need to know a good deal of grammar just as they would need to know a good deal about world languages, but most people use dictionaries only for spelling, pronunciation, or word meaning. In the freshman composition course, I don't think of myself as teaching exclusively prospective English teachers or novelists or lexicographers. Most of my students will be housewives, farmers, engineers, and businessmen. I seldom have occasion, for example, to point out the dictionary distinction between a transitive or an intransitive verb, and I do so only when the occasion arises. I don't create a problem of this kind by trying to be systematic and exhaustive. *Youth:* In other words, you have a practical approach to the subject. You don't try to teach everything that

is relevant to your objectives on the assumption that someday someone may have use for it. *Old Man:* I don't want to be misunderstood. I hope I am not merely practical. And I don't center my attention on the bottom third of a class any more than I do on the top third or the middle third. I center my attention on individuals and their language problems, and as far as I can tell, the entire class profits from this kind of instruction. In other words I enjoy and allow a discussion of a variety of cultural and technical subjects, but time limitations keep us from pursuing these discussions very far. *Youth:* You will pardon me, but I think you are straying a little from the point. *Old Man:* Quite so. With age and experience one may become too full of wisdom. To return to the question of whether my approach is practical. It is. Many years ago, when I held an executive position, the problem was brought home to me on another level than freshman composition. Since I was known to have the background of an English instructor, I was frequently called on the telephone by various officials about a point of grammar, spelling, punctuation, word meaning, or pronunciation. I soon found out that what these people did not want was a course in semantics or the history of the English language or advice to observe the usage of their peers, or even a choice between two possibilities. They wanted *an* answer. I learned to give them *an* answer, but quick. I even made up a rule if they wanted one. If I had more time, as in answering a question by letter, I would quote that impressive printed source, the unabridged dictionary. *Youth:* Are you being sarcastic about the dictionary? *Old Man:* Only in suggesting that people are likely to be impressed by the authority of what they see in print, in this case I think justifiably. A good dictionary can provide an able student with much of the help he needs in writing. As an afterthought, I would add "speaking" and "reading" to "writing." If the people who called or wrote to me had consulted a good dictionary, they could have found many of the answers for themselves. *Youth:* What the student needs, then, is a good teacher, a pen and some paper, a good dictionary, and a book that samples a wide variety of reading. *Old Man:* You state it neatly. I suppose you might add a short, concise handbook. You are taking for granted the classroom situation and the so-called intangibles, such as academic and social pressures, but we needn't go into those. *Youth:* What's all this nonsense about sectioning or homogeneous grouping? *Old Man:* The words are yours, not mine, though they express my sentiment. You probably know, as well as I do, that there are arguments on both sides. *Youth:* Yes, but I am chiefly interested in the arguments against sectioning. I taught one of the bottom sections last year. We tried not to let the students know that they were classified, but they all knew. The morale was bad in spite of anything I could do. And of course I had to fail most of the students unless I applied a grading standard different from that of the middle section. I have never taught a top section. I suppose that must be very nice. *Old Man:* One of the major defects of sectioning, it seems to me, is that the poor student is deprived of the opportunity of observing and imitating the language habits of the good student. There are other considerations: the cost to the taxpayer is high if these poor students, who may not succeed in college under any circumstances, are given additional and separate instruction. *Youth:* As a result of our discussion, I can see that the chief reason for sectioning is fallacious: that is the supposition that poor students can profit from a special kind of instruction, another dose of formal grammar. I suppose there is the assumption,

too, that the best students will be held back by the poor ones. Since they don't need grammar, the emphasis for them will be on literature. Is that it? *Old Man:* I think that is the usual line of reasoning. Actually, the poor student may learn more and be less likely to fail if he is not separately sectioned. And the exceptionally good student, who has already achieved the objectives of the course, should be excused from it, either with or without credit. *Youth:* I feel that this discussion has been very profitable. I should like to come in and talk with you again sometime, if I may. *Old Man:* You are always welcome. Let me give you one bit of advice before you leave, since that is my function. Don't discourage a student by over-correcting him. Don't bother him about divided usage. Check the dictionary yourself before you correct his grammar, pronunciation, choice of words, or spelling. You will be surprised how often he is right—or should I say "how often his usage is justified"? Well, good-by for now.

III. Teaching Sophomore Literature

Youth: I found our two earlier talks thought-provoking and helpful. We talked about teaching English in college and in particular about freshman composition. I wonder if we could talk about sophomore literature. *Old Man:* Oh, so you have been assigned a section of sophomore literature? *Youth:* Well, no, not yet. But I thought we could talk about it anyhow. I am interested, you know, even though I will be teaching only freshman composition this year. *Old Man:* Of course. In fact, the more an instructor knows about other courses taught in his department and college the better perspective he has for his own courses. *Youth:* You mean if I know something about sophomore literature, I can prepare my freshman composition students for it? *Old Man:* In some degree, almost any course is a preparation for another course, and certainly freshman composition is a kind of preparation for all courses requiring writing, reading, and speaking. But I had in mind, rather, that a knowledge of what goes on in other courses, particularly sophomore literature, can help a new English instructor to realize some of the things he does not need to include in freshman composition because they are adequately covered elsewhere. *Youth:* I understand. We mentioned that point earlier. Perhaps, then, before discussing sophomore literature, I should have some idea of the total undergraduate offerings in literature. *Old Man:* A popular course, called Introduction to the Humanities, is open to all students, including freshmen. It uses a textbook of selections from world literature, English, American, and European, from early times to the present, and touches upon art and music. For our majors in English and other juniors and seniors who are interested, we offer the usual English period courses, such as the Eighteenth Century and the Victorian Period; author courses, such as Chaucer and Shakespeare; types courses, such as the novel and the drama; and courses in American literature and European literature in translation. *Youth:* That seems to be a substantial offering. *Old Man:* Considering the size of our college and the national trend toward majoring in the technical or practical fields rather than in English, I think it is. Yet some of the young men who come to us see gaps in our offerings as compared with the catalogue listings of other colleges. They immediately clamor for the inclusion of additional courses, usually with the expectation of teaching them. *Youth:* I presume that no student is able to take even all of the courses presently offered.

Old Man: That is true, partly because of our general college requirements for graduation. It is not that we are opposed to changing our course offerings when there is justification, although I suppose we all feel a certain vested interest in what we like to call our own courses. *Youth:* You mean that introducing a new course is an attack on the established ones? *Old Man:* It can be argued. From one point of view, more courses will attract more students. From another point of view, and probably a more realistic one, if new courses are added, the present courses will suffer a decline in enrollment or have to be discontinued. Then, there is the cost: a new course costs at a minimum approximately one-fourth of an instructor's salary. It is also necessary for us to maintain the traditional courses in order that students transferring to or from our college will not be penalized. *Youth:* With the variety of courses you already offer, you must have a considerable amount of overlapping. *Old Man:* Some, inevitably, but not very much. We work the problem out among ourselves, and it is one of the responsibilities of the department head. *Youth:* Thank you for the background. Now what about the sophomore course? *Old Man:* There is not just one sophomore course; there are three. One course covers some of the older full-length classics in translation. Another course devotes one semester to the reading of full-length books of such major English writers as Swift and Austen, and a second semester to major American writers, like Hawthorne and Mark Twain. Our largest sophomore course, of which there are several sections, is a course in modern literature; again, one semester is English and the other American, and we read the full-length books of such writers as Conrad and Huxley or Dos Passos and Warren. *Youth:* You mean you spend an entire semester, for example, on two or three books, such as *Walden* and *Huckleberry Finn*? *Old Man:* Oh, no. We cover six or eight full-length books, as well as a generous sampling of the shorter forms. *Youth:* You prefer full-length books to anthologies? *Old Man:* No. We use anthologies for poetry, short stories, and plays, but the student can hardly get the full impact of a novel by reading a short selection from it in an anthology. *Youth:* For the novels, I suppose you have reading lists from which students may select library books to report on. *Old Man:* No. The inexpensive reprints that have become available in recent years make it possible for all students to read the same book at the same time. *Youth:* You lecture about the authors who are not included in your list? *Old Man:* I believe that some instructors do. I don't make a point of it, myself, though I may make a passing reference to other authors by way of comparison or contrast. I have always felt that exhaustiveness or completeness in a literature course is an illusion. *Youth:* I take it, then, that you spend all of your time lecturing about the few authors chosen. *Old Man:* Not in any formal sense. I allow plenty of opportunity for discussion or questions, even in a class of fifty students, and when the discussion centers on an important point, I bring in pertinent materials. For example, a discussion of *Of Human Bondage* usually leads to the question of whether the character of Philip represents the author, Maugham. This provides a natural opportunity for me to read to the class portions of Maugham's statement about his own life in *The Summing Up*. Or I may direct attention to the significance of the title, *Of Human Bondage*, and touch upon Spinoza's *Ethics*. Or students may find it difficult to understand Philip's infatuation for Mildred, in which case I mention not only Philip's physical handicap and home life but also the attitude toward women

in Victorian England and the difference between the British educational system and our own emphasis on coeducation. *Youth:* I can see how that approach might work with *Of Human Bondage*, but surely it couldn't be used with many books. *Old Man:* Oh, I think so. While students are reading E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, I read in class his short story "The Machine Stops" and his essay "What I Believe." Both help to drive home certain concepts expressed in the novel more effectively than I could do it in a formal lecture. I also speak about Whitman's "A Passage to India." *Youth:* Yes, I think I see. *Old Man:* Or take *You Can't Go Home Again.* When we come to the section on Foxhall Edwards, I read Edward Aswell's article, "Thomas Wolfe Did Not Kill Maxwell Perkins." This not only throws light on the character of Foxhall Edwards but gives far more insight into certain facets of George Weber's, or Thomas Wolfe's, character than a formal statement of dates and events. *Youth:* You must have to do a good deal of searching and reading to find these materials. *Old Man:* Not searching. Most of the things I use I come upon in my casual reading. *Youth:* I suppose that is an advantage an older and more experienced teacher has. Perhaps it is one reason the young instructor resorts to formal lectures. *Old Man:* I think it is something else. Lecturing is respectable and neat. Unless the instructor is in the process of writing articles or a textbook, he is content to gather his lecture materials from a few established sources, deliver his lectures unchallenged, and give examinations over them. If the lectures include summaries and analyses of the books, the students need not even read them. Both instructors and students seem to do what is expected of them, and everyone is satisfied. *Youth:* I can see that students ought to read the books, but otherwise isn't that all right? *Old Man:* I suppose you can say it is all right, but to me it isn't stimulating; it isn't fun. There is no attempt to get the student to do any interpretation or thinking on his own. There is no attempt to find out what the author has conveyed to the reader. *Youth:* You mean stimulating to the students or to you? *Old Man:* Both. Many students resent the idea that they are expected to do some thinking, but in a good classroom situation they get at least an inkling of what the process is like. And sometimes a discussion will bring out a point of meaning or interpretation that I had not thought of, even though I have taught a book for several years. Just recently a student brought up a convincing point. I had to reread considerable portions of the book before I could be sure of my ground. *Youth:* But you were sure of your ground? *Old Man:* Yes. One who has trained himself to make his own interpretations, rather than accept blindly someone else's, can usually feel confident. It often helps to know something about the author's life and other writings, and about the historical background. Even contemporary writing has a background, after all. But the most important single element is a careful reading of the piece of writing itself. *Youth:* You have been using the word "interpretation." Just what do you mean by that word? *Old Man:* Some of my students find it difficult to see the difference between a summary of a story and an interpretation. By interpretation I mean a theme or thesis, a message or generalization, for which the narrative serves as a vehicle or example. "The Killers," by Hemingway, tells the story of two thugs waiting in a lunch room to kill a professional boxer who is in trouble, perhaps for having double-crossed the man who has hired the thugs. This is a good story, but it is a better story if the student understands that the young bystander in the lunch room realizes for the first time in his life that

there are situations from which there is no escape—that, in this case, Ole Andreson, the prize fighter, will inevitably be killed, whether or not the action is deserved. This realization by the young man is interpretation: something not said but implied or suggested, something from which the reader derives satisfaction by figuring it out for himself. *Youth:* Isn't there a danger that the student will read into a story his own prejudices or preconceptions and make an entirely wrong interpretation? *Old Man:* There is. His natural inclination is to feel that Ole Andreson will somehow come out all right. In that case, he must be set right, either by other members of the class or the instructor. But he must not be simply told; he must be convinced by considering a word or phrase here or a passage there, or rereading an entire story in the light of a new interpretation. *Youth:* You allow an interpretation other than your own, if it is carefully arrived at and convincingly supported? *Old Man:* It doesn't happen very often, but when it does I not only allow it, I welcome it; in fact I am delighted. *Youth:* You include symbolism under interpretation? *Old Man:* Yes. The example I have just given is to some extent symbolic. A better example is found in William Faulkner's novel, *Intruder in the Dust.* The bright young boy, Charles Mallison, presumably stands for the emergent realization of the racial problem on the part of Southern whites; Lucas represents the problem to be faced. Again, it is a good story without this interpretation, but it is a better one with it. The difficulty is that some students don't grasp the idea of symbolism; others read far more into a story than the author intended. In this case the best I can do is apply the principle of Occam's razor: avoid using a larger concept than is necessary to provide a satisfactory explanation. I try to avoid a discussion of highly abstruse or erotic symbolism. *Youth:* And I suppose a recognition of humor, ridicule, irony, and satire play a part in interpretation. *Old Man:* Very definitely. Even the fairly obvious humor of Thurber's "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" is difficult for some students. But humor is contagious. As I read the story aloud, these students will smile or try to laugh because they hear others laughing. *Youth:* You mentioned reading aloud before, but I thought that you did it to bring in supplementary material not readily available to students. I gather you feel there are other values in reading aloud. *Old Man:* As you know, much poetry, and prose too for that matter, is written by ear. If it is not heard as well as seen, a great deal is lost. It seems to me that basically the principle applies to the conversations in *Babbitt* as well as to the poetry of Robinson or Frost. Furthermore, a piece that is read aloud skillfully can help a student in his interpretation. Another reason that I read—or have students read—aloud in class is that it is the one way I can be sure the entire group will have immediately in mind the passage to be discussed or analyzed. *Youth:* I suppose you use recordings? *Old Man:* Yes. In moderation, recordings can be helpful. *Youth:* I take it, then, that the sophomore course, or at least the course in modern literature, of which you have been speaking, requires no preparation in English composition and is not necessarily a preparation for advanced literature courses. *Old Man:* In general that is right, though it is purposely not open to freshmen and assumes some degree of maturity, and it is perhaps as good a preparation for other literature courses as any. Ony a few of the students in the sophomore courses become English majors. For most of them it will be the only college course in literature they will have. Likewise, hardly any of them will become creative writers. *Youth:* Why do you mention creative writers? *Old Man:* Because, from the creative writer's point of view, form

and style are especially important. I do not ignore these matters if they help appreciation or understanding, but I do not stress them. An emphasis on prosody, for example, is likely to increase the average student's preconceived distaste for poetry. But to point out the advantages of using the barber as a narrator in Ring Lardner's "Haircut" and the deceptively rambling manner in which the story is unfolded heighten the students' interest and appreciation. *Youth:* Just what is the basis for choosing the books in the course in modern literature? *Old Man:* In the courses that include books of the older, traditional authors, there is no particular problem. No one would question, for example, the selection of Homer's *Odyssey* or Melville's *Moby-Dick,* and they are available in inexpensive reprints. But with the more recent writers there are a good many considerations. The current best sellers are not usually available in reprints, and if they were, there is always doubt as to the survival value or permanent worth of even the best of them. *Youth:* I suppose you have to keep in mind, too, the background, abilities, and interests of the students. *Old Man:* Yes. For the most part our students have rural or small-town backgrounds and have little acquaintance with urban life or sophisticated social groups. Their reading background is negligible. Most of them are majoring in areas far removed from English and are enrolled only because their departments try to broaden their education by requiring a course in literature. They are relatively young and inexperienced. They are both shocked and fascinated by what they think is sensational. A story in which a character utters a "hell" or a "damn" makes some of them laugh, and for some students any character who takes a drink is a bad man. *Youth:* In view of the frankness of much of our best modern literature I can see that you have a real problem. You probably have to be careful about the handling of religious and political as well as moral issues. *Old Man:* We do. And we have to try to find a middle ground between easy, self-reading books, such as Forester's *Captain Horatio Hornblower,* that students are pretty sure to like, and difficult books, requiring careful analysis, such as Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse,* that students are pretty sure to dislike. *Youth:* I should think you might be forced to use one of the carefully edited anthologies and disregard the full-length books. Or perhaps the course should be open only to juniors and seniors. *Old Man:* No. Over a period of years we have arrived at a workable and creditable list, which we alter from time to time. And, in answer to your second point, it would be unfortunate to deny large numbers of students access to one of the most vital phases of our living culture. Modern literature is an important medium for understanding our contemporary society. An experienced instructor who treats the literature objectively and with dignity performs a valuable service. He may not only take the students through some good pieces of literature; he may also give them such a liking for good literature that they acquire a leisure-time activity enjoyable and profitable to them for the rest of their lives. *Youth:* Are you suggesting that some instructors perform a disservice? *Old Man:* Well, we sometimes have an instructor who doesn't see—or may not want to see—our problem. He may have qualities desirable in a teacher: learning, a pleasing personality, industry, and so on. But in this course he can easily get himself and others into trouble in either of two ways. In the first place, he may fail in his obligation to place in their proper perspective those portions of literature that many students consider shocking or sensational. *Youth:* Yes. I can see that. *Old Man:* In the second place, if he is opinionated and aggressive, he may manage to have a book included

on the list that is almost certain to cause trouble. "What," he will say, "no book by so-and-so? Why, he is one of our greatest modern authors." Or he will say, "That book by so-and-so is clearly a greater book than this one." *Youth:* And if you try to argue with him, he will wave the banner of academic freedom, cry "censorship," and ask whether this is a college or a high school. Is that it? *Old Man:* Precisely. "It is no concern of mine," he will say, "that the department or the college may be damaged by unfavorable publicity. It's the principle that counts." *Youth:* But shouldn't the colleges provide leadership? *Old Man:* Of course. They should and do. But if one moves too far or too fast in upsetting the community mores, the result may be the opposite of what he intends. *Youth:* I suppose you would consider me impertinent if I injected the names of Joan of Arc and Copernicus in this connection. *Old Man:* No. I don't think the cases are quite parallel, but your point is well taken. It goes without saying that if I were younger, less experienced, and dealing with an abstraction instead of a concrete situation, I might be on the other side. *Youth:* I don't understand how an instructor could get such a book on the list. Doesn't the department head or a senior professor supervise the course and make major decisions? *Old Man:* Any organization can operate under a number of different systems; for example, autocracy, laissez-faire, or militant democracy. Within my memory our department has operated under all three of these systems. Each one has its good and bad points. At present, under the third system, where the vote of a number of relatively inexperienced instructors outweighs the judgment or indifference of a few old-timers, the changes may be exciting but they may also prove to be disastrous. *Youth:* We have had another good conversation. Thank you. Just one more question before I leave. Do you think your observations concerning the teaching of literature will need to be altered by the large increase in enrollment expected in the next few years? *Old Man:* Not necessarily. If classes are allowed to become very large the instruction will inevitably become more formalized. But they don't need to become larger for lack of competent teaching personnel. I don't know whether any study has been made to show the extent of frustration among instructors having doctors' degrees in English in comparison with those having only masters' degrees or even bachelors' degrees, but I should say that almost any healthy-minded adult who has acquired skill in the use of his language and knows and loves his literature is potentially a good teacher of both freshman composition and sophomore literature. Fortunately, there are a good many such people.

IV. Student Grades and Conferences

Youth: I came in to see whether you had time to talk to me about student grades and conferences. *Old Man:* Surely. Excuse me. Here is one of my students now. Perhaps I can give you a demonstration before we have a discussion. Why don't you sit back there and pretend to read a book? *Youth:* Fine. *Old Man:* Come over here and sit down. You are Mr. ——? *Student:* Lowboy. Joe Lowboy. *Old Man:* You are in what class? *Student:* Modern Literature, the ten o'clock period. *Old Man:* All right. (*Consults grade book.*) What can I do for you, Mr. Lowboy? *Student:* I came in to find out what I got on my last test. *Old Man:* A "D." *Student:* I thought I did better than that. *Old Man:* Were you in class when I returned and discussed the test?

Student: No. I slept in that day. With the test just over I didn't think you'd be doing anything very important. *Old Man:* That is too bad. I spent most of the period analyzing the questions and reading and discussing the best answers. *Student:* I didn't think that question about interpreting a poem we hadn't been assigned or discussed before was a very fair one. *Old Man:* Oh, I think it was. We have been reading and interpreting a good many poems recently. This one was not particularly difficult. Sometimes I like to know what a student can do on his own. *Student:* Can I see my test? *Old Man:* Yes. Here it is. *Student:* I don't see any mistakes, except a few in spelling and grammar. You don't take off for those, do you? *Old Man:* Yes, if they are serious or numerous. I think you should be able to spell the names of the authors and the chief characters. You ought to know the difference between "to" and "too," and "their" and "there" and "they're," and "it's" and "its." And you ought to be able to write a complete sentence and make a subject and verb or a pronoun and antecedent agree. This is not a course in English composition, but if you don't understand these errors, I'll try to explain them to you. *Student:* Oh, I know those things all right. It was just carelessness. *Old Man:* Then you should allow time to read over your answers and make the corrections before handing in your test. *Student:* You mean I got a "D" just for that? What does this word "organization" mean? *Old Man:* It means that you jump back and forth from one point to another or you ramble on without knowing where you are going. *Student:* What I said was all right, then; it was just the way I said it. Is that it? *Old Man:* More or less. And what you didn't say. Those "X's" and "no's" in the margin indicate certain errors in fact, but they concern details that are not as important as your failure to support your generalizations with specific examples or concrete instances. *Student:* I didn't think that was necessary. I knew you had read the books. *Old Man:* But I need to know what you know. Would you like to read this "A" test? I read it to the class. . . . *Student:* His answers are longer. *Old Man:* Length is not important in itself. The answers are relatively full and complete and show an understanding of both the questions asked and the books read. And there are no errors in mechanics or organization. *Student:* They are good answers, all right. Of course I didn't expect an "A," but I thought I'd get a "B," or at least a "C." *Old Man:* What were your grades in English composition? *Student:* Well—"D's." I should have had "C's," but I didn't get along with the instructor. *Old Man:* What about your high school English? *Student:* I never did very good in English, but I passed. *Old Man:* And in college the standards are higher and the competition is keener? *Student:* I'll say. But I read the books, except that I didn't quite finish the last one, and I talked about them with some of the fellows in the house that are taking the course, so I thought I'd do pretty good. *Old Man:* You didn't receive an "F," you know. *Student:* You don't fail anyone in this course, do you? I thought this was supposed to be an easy course. *Old Man:* We try to make the course as interesting and profitable as we can, but if a student doesn't come to class or do the assigned reading, he may fail. *Student:* You mean you take off for absences? *Old Man:* Yes, if they are excessive and unexcused. *Student:* How many absences are excessive? *Old Man:* No specific number. I judge each case separately on its merits. *Student:* I thought every student was entitled to three unexcused absences in each course. *Old Man:* That is a student invented rule. It has no basis in fact. *Student:* I don't see why a student should be required to attend classes if he writes good examinations. *Old Man:* That is an issue I am afraid I can't discuss with you

now. The college catalogue states that students are expected to attend classes regularly. *Student:* Well, I guess that's that. I still don't see how you can tell what grade to give a test. Do you grade on a curve? *Old Man:* Very roughly, yes. The best tests are "A" and "B," the worst are "D" and "F," and the ones in between are "C." After grading several hundreds or thousands of tests over a period of years, an instructor can usually be pretty sure what grade a test deserves. *Student:* You don't believe in objective tests, then? *Old Man:* I sometimes give objective tests, but even with objective tests the instructor decides what and how many test items to include and how many errors constitute a "B" or a "D." *Student:* You think it is fair to grade partly on writing when the course doesn't teach writing? *Old Man:* Certainly. In any course, but particularly in English. One of the basic aims of the college is to graduate literate students. Students should be provided with every possible opportunity to write and held to a high standard. *Student:* This course is different than chemistry or mathematics. *Old Man:* No doubt. What is your major? *Student:* Business. *Old Man:* And this course is required? *Student:* I don't see why it is. It doesn't have anything to do with business. *Old Man:* Perhaps your faculty adviser can explain it to you. I didn't make the requirement. *Student:* Do you think I should drop this course and concentrate on my others? *Old Man:* That is not for me to say. Your faculty adviser is the person to talk to. I would like to know, however, what your grade average is to date. *Student:* Well, I didn't do very good at first, so I transferred from engineering to education and then to business. I made almost a "C" average last semester. I been working awful hard. I think I made a "B" in my last quiz in accounting. I got to get my grades up in order to graduate. *Old Man:* Have you been to your other instructors about your grades? *Student:* No, not yet. I thought I'd try English first; it isn't as strict. *Old Man:* I think you mean clear-cut, rigid, inflexible, or arbitrary. *Student:* Well, maybe. Do you think I stand a chance of getting a "B" in the course? *Old Man:* Your work to date doesn't point to a "B," but I wouldn't care to predict. I can't make a judgment until all of the evidence is in. *Student:* How much does the final count? *Old Man:* Enough to decide the course grade if the student is a borderline case, say between "D" and "C"; or perhaps enough to alter his grade standing by as much as one letter grade. Every case has to be considered separately. *Student:* If I make a "B" in the final, will I get a "B" in the course? *Old Man:* I have already answered that question as well as I can. *Student:* Will the final be essay or objective? *Old Man:* Either or both. You can't go wrong if you read and reread the books, review your notes, and study for any kind of test you can think of. *Student:* You mean we are supposed to take notes in class? *Old Man:* I have never said so. I notice that some students do. *Student:* What do you mean about rereading a book? *Old Man:* Some of my best students have told me that they read a book through very quickly the first time to get an over view and because a later passage may explain something they are puzzled about at the moment. They then reread all or portions of the book to get everything straight and to fix certain points in their minds. *Student:* I don't read very good. I went to both the Writing Clinic and the Reading Clinic last year, but they don't seem to help me in this course much. *Old Man:* Their functions are limited. I gather that you don't read much on your own. *Student:* No. I never liked to read. *Old Man:* I have a list of books here that I sometimes give to students interested in reading. Would you like to have a copy? *Student:* Well, sure, but I don't think I'll have time to read them. *Old Man:* No, you may not. I am only sug-

gesting that one way to learn to read is to do a lot of reading just as one way to learn to write is to do a lot of writing. Courses and conferences are simply aids. *Student:* Well, thanks. I just wanted to know about my grade. *Old Man:* I am afraid you will have to accept my judgment about your grade. Assigning grades is one of the things I am trained and paid to do. Come in again if I can help you with your work. (Student leaves.) *Youth:* I should think you would be tempted to fail that student for being rude or obstinate. *Old Man:* That is a natural momentary reaction, but I try not to be vindictive. The student has been officially admitted to the college, and his department requires him to take this course. I must treat him as fairly and rationally as I can. *Youth:* But surely you don't have to go to such length to satisfy a "D" student about his grade. *Old Man:* Usually not. One or two pointed questions or remarks may be enough. In fact I have found that the more an instructor talks about grades and types of examinations the more students want to talk about grades and examinations and the more dissatisfied they may become. It is an interesting subject, but I am not teaching a course in testing or educational methods. *Youth:* I suppose, then, that you were leading this student on in order to demonstrate to me the kind of questions you are asked and your answers to them. *Old Man:* Yes. An instructor is almost sure to be asked such questions. If he knows the answers, he can save himself embarrassment and let even the unpleasant student realize that the instructor is master of the situation. Not much actual instruction can be given in a conference or two compared with a semester or a year of class meetings, but conferences have their uses. *Youth:* From one point of view, then, the conference is a public relations device to make the student, or his parents, feel that everything possible is being done for him. *Old Man:* Exactly. Consequently, it is important to avoid a scene or allow anyone to lose his temper even when there seems to be plenty of justification. *Youth:* I was going to suggest that all of this bickering about grades might be better taken care of by some general announcements to the entire class, but I can see now that class time should not be used in this way. *Old Man:* That's right. In any case, some students feel the need of private attention. They may have genuine academic or personal problems or simply are lonely. I am considerate of such students, but beyond a certain point I try to direct them elsewhere–say to their faculty adviser or the student counselor or some of their classmates. *Youth:* I suppose a student conference should be in private, with no third person present or listening. That is why you told me to pretend to read a book during your recent conference. *Old Man:* Yes, when possible. A third person creates a show-off or self-conscious atmosphere. *Youth:* I would like to question your refusal to tell Mr. Lowboy the type of final examination to expect. I had understood that providing students with sample examinations was considered good pedagogy. *Old Man:* I admit that telling students the type of examination to expect is the current style, though it may not be the style ten years from now. Whether it is the best practice is another matter. It adds to the present overemphasis on grades and credits rather than knowledge and appreciation of a field of study. *Youth:* Perhaps that accounts, in part, for your preference for the essay type of examination. *Old Man:* I should think that even an expert skilled in making objective tests would find it difficult to say a student had only a 79 percent understanding of *The Great Gatsby* instead of an 80 percent understanding, and therefore was entitled to a "C" grade instead of a "B" grade. *Youth:* You would say, then, that an instructor's subjective judgment of a stu-

dent's grasp of a book as shown by his oral responses in class or in an essay test is more nearly valid than a numerical grade based on a percentage of factual items answered correctly. *Old Man:* I don't intend to be put on the spot. If my classes are allowed to become too large, I will use objective tests in self-protection unless I am provided with trained reading assistants. I would still say, however, that essay tests can be judged not only for factual content, but as well, for reasoning, organization, and such minimum requirements of writing skill as spelling; that they lend themselves particularly to interpretation and analysis; and that they direct the students' attention to the most important values of the course. Furthermore, cheating and cramming are likely to be less effective with essay than with objective tests. *Youth:* You know, I can't get Joe Lowboy out of my mind. The thought of him makes me angry. *Old Man:* His values are not yours or mine, but they are very simple, and the product of a dominant element in our culture: get something out of the other fellow—inside information, unjustified grades, unearned money. In ten years, whether he graduates or not, he will be making more money than I make now, after a lifetime of study and teaching. *Youth:* If he had spent as much intelligence and energy on his reading and writing as on his concern for his grade, he would have been better off. *Old Man:* Those are not his values, as I have said. Perhaps they will change some day—partly as a result of my class or this conference. *Youth:* I should think such a student and conference would make you go sour. *Old Man:* There are also some high moments in teaching. After a good class period I often have a feeling of exultation that may last through the day. And there are some really exciting moments. The first year I came here, the students applauded when I came into the room to give the final examination. And recently, in a summer school class in English composition made up largely of elementary school teachers, each student told me in a low voice as she left the last class meeting how much she had enjoyed the course. There were a few who were disgruntled about their low grades, but even one man who had tried to work on me for a grade added his bit. I felt like a young celebrity and nearly choked up before they all left. *Youth:* I suppose there are some low moments, too. *Old Man:* There are many time consuming annoyances, such as grading papers or examinations or making out absence reports and grade sheets. Much of this work could be performed by adequately trained clerical help, and leave the instructor more time for study or reading or research—the things that he loves to do and that help him to be a valuable teacher. The public and the administrators, who are necessarily sensitive to the prejudices of the public, are short-sighted in this respect. *Youth:* I have heard it said that if you don't keep an instructor in his office he will go home and mow the lawn or take care of the baby or go shopping for the groceries. *Old Man:* He could do worse. Almost anything he does will help him in his appreciation of literature. He is and should be a special person or personality. And considering his ability and training he isn't paid much. But what the public doesn't see is that he reads far into the night or in the early morning when they are playing bridge or sleeping. Or if they do know his habits, they say, "Why isn't he more like us? Why isn't he normal?"—not realizing that such characteristics have led him into teaching English in the first place and that what they want in a teacher are the products of these characteristics. *Youth:* What you have said is interesting, but not an answer to my question. *Old Man:* No, I suppose not. You want to know whether I have had any really bad classes. Yes, I have. Two, in fact—which I tell myself is not a bad average. *Youth:* I should think not, considering the number of years you

have been teaching. *Old Man:* One was during the war, when the college admitted high school seniors. From the point of view of deportment that class was a failure. I don't suppose your elementary school monthly report card indicated a grade for "deportment." *Youth:* No, I'm afraid not. *Old Man:* A great pity, though in your case you seem to have been brought up with a considerable amount of this quality. The other difficult class was some years earlier, but after I had taught for several years. I was aware that a few students can disrupt an entire class. I tried everything: spotting the trouble spots, re-seating, personal conferences—nothing worked. It was the only time I wasn't able to determine the difficulty and do something about it. All I got from that class was a few condolences appended to the final examination bluebooks. What most of the students got out of it was—I was going to say a "hayride" but "unfortunate" is a better word. I am glad you brought the point up. Morale, or good working conditions, are important both for the instructor and the student. *Youth:* I appreciate your comments, but I should like to get back to the problem of grades. *Old Man:* Grading is not as simple as I made it sound to Mr. Lowboy. Sometimes elements are so nicely balanced that I spend a long time deciding whether a student deserves a "C" or a "B" in a course. I may decide on a "B" because I am aware that I dislike his aggressiveness or some other personality trait, and I don't want the grade to reflect prejudice. But if I give him a "B" I may have to give "B's" to several similar borderline cases for the sake of consistency. And if I do that I will have a disproportionately large number of "B's." This will help to give the course a reputation for being easy and me a reputation for being an easy grader, neither of which I want. A young instructor is more likely to err in the other direction and gain an unfortunate reputation with both his students and the administration by giving too many "D's" and "F's." *Youth:* In other words, grades vary from instructor to instructor, from course to course, and from school to school. *Old Man:* Inevitably and properly so, I think. That doesn't mean that the situation is chaotic. The best students usually receive the best grades. Students in courses that provide essential preparation for advanced courses must be held to a more exacting standard than those in nontechnical courses or courses complete in themselves. A larger proportion of students in advanced courses receive high grades than in elementary courses. And so on. The young instructor can save himself and others a lot of headaches if he will try to discover and adjust to the grading standards of his new school, and also if he will try to keep the grades in his sectioned courses, like freshman composition and sophomore literature, in approximate conformity with the customary local standard of those courses. *Youth:* Perhaps a uniform final examination is the solution. *Old Man:* I don't think so. Standardized tests have their uses, of course. Over a period of several years we used a standardized test in freshman composition to compare our students with those in other colleges and to see how much progress they made. But we did not use the test as a basis for student grades or measuring the efficiency of an instructor, and we were fully aware that it was not an adequate measure of our course objectives. When a large number of instructors teach sections of the same course, some thought should be given to holding the course together, but the instructor should be encouraged to teach his classes in his own way, including his own choice of a final examination. The best teaching will not result from production line methods. *Youth:* I can see that again I have taken a lot of your time. Thank you for being so patient and helpful. *Old Man:* It is a pleasure. Good-by.

V. PROMOTIONS

Youth: Can you spare me a few minutes? *Old Man:* Yes, of course. Come in and sit down. I haven't seen you for a long time. How have things been with you? *Youth:* Quite well, thank you, but I have a problem I'd like to talk to you about. I have been here for a year and a half, and I am concerned about my prospects. You see, we're going to have a baby and I need to know where I stand. *Old Man:* Congratulations, that's fine. But haven't you come to the wrong person about your prospects? It is true I have been designated your adviser, but the department head is the proper one to answer your question. Anything I might say would have no official weight and might mislead you. *Youth:* I realize that, but I thought you could help me explore the problem in general, and give me the benefit of your observation and experience. *Old Man:* I can certainly do that. To begin with, then, how old are you? *Youth:* Twenty-eight. *Old Man:* A very marketable age; in fact, in this respect you are safe for another five or ten years, depending upon the market and what you produce meanwhile. By then, in any case, you should have made a place for yourself. *Youth:* It isn't long, is it? *Old Man:* No, and the time slips by very rapidly. It is easy to drift through those five or ten years. *Youth:* What do you mean? *Old Man:* Simply that for many people those are their most productive years, the years when they are crystalizing their ideas and have enough interest and energy to express them. *Youth:* You mean in their teaching? *Old Man:* In their teaching, of course. But I mean over and above their teaching. *Youth:* You mean publication? *Old Man:* It is one of the most widely accepted methods. The assumption is that the writer both improves himself and contributes to the understanding or knowledge of others in his field. If you will examine a copy of the *Dictionary of American Scholars* or the annual *PMLA* Bibliography, you will get some idea of the extent to which college teachers publish. The doctor's dissertation is a step in this direction. By the way, what is the status of your doctoral work? *Youth:* Well, I thought I'd have it done by now, but the teaching has been challenging and time-consuming and the social life interesting—as a matter of fact I haven't done much with it, except to let it worry me a little now and then. *Old Man:* I take it you didn't go back to work on it last summer. *Youth:* No, I didn't. I needed the money and got a job on a farm. *Old Man:* That is one of the things I mean by drifting. Couldn't you have borrowed the money? *Youth:* I don't know. I have borrowed money several times in the past. It has usually been embarrassing. Besides, I don't know whether I can or want to complete the work for my degree. *Old Man:* It is for you to decide. Some people are made stronger, some weaker by the experience. I have known some dull people who have earned their degrees and some bright ones who have not. The fact remains that the doctor's degree is usually considered a basic requirement in a successful college teaching career. *Youth:* You mean all of the work I have done beyond the master's degree doesn't count unless I actually hold the doctor's degree? *Old Man:* Not very much. Colleges are judged or accredited partly by the formal status of their staff members. If a faculty member's name is followed by a "Ph.D.," the position of the college is strengthened. One may not agree with this policy, but it is a fact. *Youth:* You mean there is nothing else one can do to get ahead except obtain a doctor's degree? *Old Man:* There are always geniuses—or people who think they are—but geniuses may be frowned upon in col-

leges as elsewhere until they become national or world celebrities. *Youth:* I see your point there, but aren't there other ways of advancing? *Old Man:* If the department head or the president happens to put his finger on you and places you on a committee or asks you to attend an out-of-town meeting with him or for him, you should certainly respond without reservation. *Youth:* Yes. *Old Man:* You know as well as I do that some people are personally more attractive than others. Some make themselves known through their activities in social, religious, civic, or educational groups. Some travel widely, entertain extensively, or acquire reputations as speakers. I suppose every school differs in the weight it attaches to such considerations; that is, whether they are thought to be simply private and personal or important enough to be rewarded. I should think that in general they would count, if at all, on the positive side. *Youth:* And on the negative side? *Old Man:* Failure to treat the townspeople cordially and courteously; failure to pay one's bills promptly. Any conspicuous violation of the community mores, whatever they may be. *Youth:* Some faculty members seem to think the way to get ahead is to organize or join a group that attacks the existing policies or the administration. *Old Man:* I suppose that is partly a matter of youth, partly temperament. I should say that in education, experience has shown it to be one of the least promising methods, particularly in an old and sound organization. Of course there is always a certain amount of private grumbling, but that is hardly the same thing. *Youth:* We have explored the fringes. Let's get to the center. If I stay here and do an especially good job of teaching, how soon can I expect to be promoted? *Old Man:* I can discuss the question with you, but of course I can't answer it. That is the kind of question for the department head. *Youth:* Perhaps he can't answer it either, so let us discuss it. *Old Man:* In the first place, teaching skill or effectiveness is difficult to judge or measure. Many attempts have been made, but hardly anyone is satisfied with them. That may be one reason emphasis is placed on degrees and publications, which are more tangible. *Youth:* In other words, if I complete my degree or start publishing or both, I should expect to be promoted more quickly than otherwise. *Old Man:* I should certainly think so. *Youth:* But, without either, I might still be promoted eventually? *Old Man:* I don't know. Some colleges are more rigid than others, and any college may shift its policy from time to time or from person to person. Even colleges with a stated policy may make exceptions. *Youth:* I understand that in some of the larger and older universities, the only ranks considered permanent are those of associate and full professor. The ranks of instructor and assistant professor are on a year-to-year basis, and the appointments are not continued beyond a specified number of years. *Old Man:* So I understand. One reason is clear. If increases in rank were automatic, based primarily on length of service, soon nearly every staff member would have the rank of full professor, and the cost to the university would be considerably greater. Another reason is that there would be no special reward for those who had worked hard to establish themselves as outstanding authorities in their fields. *Youth:* And much of the teaching in the service courses, particularly freshman composition, is done by part-time instructors who are working for their doctors' degrees and are more likely to be regarded as graduate students than as faculty members. *Old Man:* Yes. I believe that in some of the larger universities, the permanent ranks form what used to be called a community of scholars, and admission to such a group is largely by invitation of the members. *Youth:* I suppose in many colleges, the

procedure is less formalized. On the one hand, it does not follow that of some of the larger universities. On the other hand, it does not follow that of many public school systems with automatic salary increases based on amount of education and length of service. *Old Man:* Very true. It is perhaps one reason some young college teachers tend to become restive. Another reason may be that young English teachers in a small college are likely to associate more freely with teachers in other departments, where the situation is quite different from English. Because of the many classes in freshman composition, an English department may have a large number of instructors compared with other departments with few or none at this rank. *Youth:* I take it, then, that after teaching in a college for two or three years, many English instructors leave because they cannot be assured of promotion. What becomes of them? *Old Man:* Some, particularly those who already have their degrees, accept positions at a higher salary or rank in other colleges. With two or three years of full-time teaching experience their bargaining power has increased. *Youth:* But why wouldn't they stay on at the same college with a higher salary or rank? *Old Man:* If there is an opening, sometimes they do. Sometimes, however, they prefer to live in a different part of the country or in a community of a different size. *Youth:* Or they want to be near relatives or friends. Or they think that a college they know less about may offer greater opportunities. *Old Man:* I suppose so. Many return to their graduate schools and continue to work for their degrees. *Youth:* Do they get their degrees? *Old Man:* Not always. Sometimes they become discouraged and decide they are better suited to another kind of work. Some even make such a decision before returning to graduate school. I know of one young man who turned to law, another to medicine; another went into government service; another entered his father's business. *Youth:* And no doubt a number go into public school teaching. *Old Man:* Yes. And it is not uncommon for the young women to get married. *Youth:* Have you known anyone who has become a writer? *Old Man:* Only one who has devoted his full time to writing. Most of those who write have writing only as an avocation, or as part of a research program. *Youth:* I shall no doubt have to make my own decision concerning my future—at least to the extent that I have the freedom to do so. Thank you for talking with me. *Old Man:* May your decision prove to be a wise one. Good-by.

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